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Chapter 21

Socialisation and Spiritual Capital: What Difference do Clergy Families Make?

Mathew Guest

Introduction

Ever since Gordon Brown became Prime Minister of Great Britain in 2007, there has been renewed interest in the experience of those raised as children of the clergy. In the early months of his premiership, Brown made repeated reference to his father's status as a Church of Scotland minister and to how it was his upbringing as a 'child of the manse' that furnished him with the 'moral compass' that continues to inform his politics and social values. Brown is not alone among public figures in being the child of an ordained Christian minister: journalist and TV presenter Jon Snow is the son of an Anglican bishop, as are comedian Hugh Dennis and radio DJ Tim Westwood; the father of well-known TV personality David Frost was a minister in the Methodist Church; actor Denzel Washington's father was a Pentecostal minister; and former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is the daughter of John Wesley Rice, a minister in the Presbyterian Church, whose experience of racial discrimination in Alabama shaped his daughter's emerging political stance. Such observations invite reflection on the significance that being a clergy child might have for one's values, particularly in relation to ideals of public service. The cultural stereotype of the clergy child – as either saint or sinner – is implicitly called into question and, as I demonstrate in this chapter, the evidence demands a more complex understanding.

So how might we make sense of this relationship between a particular kind of upbringing and the development of values within adulthood? In sociological terms, how can we measure the long-term consequences of particular patterns of socialisation? This is an important question for the sociology of religion because it probes the heart of the secularisation thesis – that is, how religious values are transmitted over time, and with what success? – *and* raises the possibility of a channel for religious influence within contexts in which Christianity is often presumed to have at best a highly diminished public profile. Despite this wider theoretical resonance, we struggle to find a large body of empirical research into these pressing questions, certainly within the UK, and indeed, further afield as well. Part of this problem is financial: studies of inter-generational value transmission are necessarily expensive as they demand a large number of interviews among different generational cohorts in order to have a sufficient evidence base for claims

that apply across a particular society. Some North-American-based studies have successfully met this need, and the work of Wade Clark Roof (1999) and Christian Smith (2005), in particular, is noteworthy for charting trends in value change that apply across large geographical areas, and which therefore reveal important patterns in the changing character of US culture generally.

While these projects draw from survey and interview data, historian Callum Brown has offered a more nuanced picture of generational change in modern Britain by using oral history, piecing together the shifting ways in which Christianity has been maintained, from its status as part of the cultural fabric to an optional lifestyle choice, in his influential book *The Death of Christian Britain* (2001). Brown emphasises the family – particularly the role of women – as a key factor in shaping the status of Christianity as a social force, and in so doing offers a set of useful reference points for addressing the significance of clergy families in contemporary Britain. In response to a sociological drift towards emphasising the sovereign individual actor (e.g. Giddens 1991), other research has affirmed the importance of the family as an enduring influence over the values individuals profess in adulthood (Bengtson et al. 2002). According to this argument, contrary to some theories associated with post- or late-modernity, we do not exist as isolated individuals, but within persistent networks – of family, friends and colleagues – that continue to shape our identities as we develop throughout our lives. It is against the background of these insights that Douglas Davies and myself attempted an analysis of the significance of values learnt within clerical families, focusing on the family as a site in which values are learnt in a variety of complex ways (Davies and Guest 2007). In a three-year empirical study of the families of Church of England bishops across two generations, we asked whether there are patterns in the acceptance, rejection and development of what we refer to as ‘spiritual capital’.

Spiritual capital and the transmission of values

While there is now less dispute over whether family remains an important site for the formation of religious identity, sociologists differ in their attempts to theorise the process of socialisation. One approach would draw insights from a resource mobilisation perspective, focusing on what it is that is acquired, learnt or developed via the socialisation process. Theories of resource mobilisation have been used to good effect in the study of social movements (Zald and McCarthy 1987) as they foreground the processes whereby groups are empowered to emerge and thrive within particular social contexts. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has used a related model to explore inequalities in education systems (1977b) and the power imbalance found within some churches (1991). Bourdieu’s theoretical framework is distinguished by his use of the term ‘capital’ to refer to valued resources operative in a given ‘social field’. Such resources may take a variety of forms, including economic capital (money and finance) or social capital (significant relations between individuals), for example. In his work on religion, Bourdieu develops

the concept of 'religious capital' as the power invested in religious authorities – most notably the priesthood. This 'religious capital' is embodied in things like specialist theological knowledge and sacramental oversight, both available to the priesthood but not the laity, and is expressed and sustained through the power of religious authorities to define the nature of salvation. While illuminating to a degree, Bourdieu's approach has its limitations. In a useful application and critique, American sociologist Bradford Verter (2003) has argued that a more subtle concept is needed if capital theory is to take proper account of the peculiarities of religion in contemporary Western cultures. According to Verter, Bourdieu's model 'treats religion as an institution but not as a disposition, as an intricate system of coercion but not as a liquid species of capital. In short, it employs categories that are too rigid to account for the fluidities of today's spiritual marketplace' (Verter 2003, 151).

Verter's critique of Bourdieu is helpful for a number of reasons. Not least, it demonstrates the importance of allowing changes in the social and religious landscape to modify the theoretical models we use to explain them. The utility of sociological theory is to be judged not just on its explanatory power but on its capacity to shed light on social phenomena without being ethnocentric or anachronistic. Verter's more developed understanding of religious resources, which he calls 'spiritual capital', presents a much more fluid, open-ended phenomenon than Bourdieu's 'religious capital', which is restricted by its indebtedness to a strict distinction between priesthood and laity. Rather, 'spiritual capital' is conceived as 'a more widely diffused commodity, governed by more complex patterns of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption' (Verter 2003, 158). Verter's model takes into account the characteristics of the contemporary religious landscape and, by retaining Bourdieu's emphasis on power relations, captures the ways in which capital may be converted into different forms. For example, spiritual capital may be vested in a position of institutional advantage – that of a senior cleric or religious official, perhaps – which is then used by its incumbent to acquire symbolic capital or prestige. Or spiritual capital may refer to religious knowledge, perhaps acquired through pre-ordination training, which is later used as cultural capital (knowledge that is accorded status in the broader cultural context). It is important to note that a capital-based approach to understanding religious values is not unproblematic. Some critics would take issue with the use of economic language to explain religious phenomena, arguing that the distinguishing qualities of religion are not done justice by a set of metaphors based on material acquisition and exchange. A further criticism may consider 'spiritual capital' to be so all-encompassing that it fails to command any explanatory power; if spiritual capital is so flexible and can be so easily converted into other forms of capital, then how can it be possible to say for sure whether a particular phenomenon should be properly categorised as 'spiritual capital' or not? These are important questions, questions that are thrown into relief when ideas of capital are applied within an analysis of the transmission of religious values.

Clergy families and spiritual capital

Between 2001 until 2004, Douglas Davies and myself conducted the 'Clergy and British Society' project, tracing the lives and influence of senior Anglican clergy from 1940 to 2000 (Davies and Guest 2007). A major part of this project concerned the adult sons and daughters of these (now retired) Church of England bishops, focusing upon the extent to which they have taken on the values affirmed within the clergy family of their childhood. We employed two research techniques, developed with specific aims and objectives in mind. The need to gather demographic background – particularly the individual religious and career histories of respondents – meant that a questionnaire was necessary, and we received detailed responses from 225 individuals, including retired Anglican bishops, their wives and their adult sons and daughters. The further need for an exploration into how bishops, their wives and children make sense of their identities in relation to spiritual capital required extended interviews, and we conducted 51 recorded, semi-structured conversations with a sample from among our survey respondents. These allowed us to examine how these individuals reflect on their experiences as members of a clergy family, on family life, its peculiarities, benefits and problems, and how these relate to the development of outlooks and values which have subsequently emerged. While we were enquiring about specific events and experiences, we were asking individuals to recount them often many years after these events took place, and therefore through the inevitable filters of time and subsequent life experience. As such, we were not seeking to uncover causal historical relationships or determinative trends in generational value transmission. While our questionnaire data allowed us to place our findings within a solid historical, ecclesiastical and cultural context, our interest was primarily in how individuals construct and negotiate acquired spiritual capital through the accounts they offer of their lives.

With respect to the clergy children, our thematic foci were careers and religious identity; we wanted to explore how the spiritual capital acquired from a clergy upbringing was operative in respondents' accounts of their professional and religious development. Just how did clergy sons and daughters appear to draw from their upbringing in constructing their professional and religious identities as adults? The data are rich and complex, so for the purposes of brevity, here I focus on a single pattern in the emergence of values, one that illustrates the interconnectedness between experiences of family in childhood and orientations to religion and professional life that emerge in adult life.

Many sociologists have developed Emile Durkheim's argument that the modern world is characterised by an increasing degree of differentiation. Institutions that were once interrelated are now relatively discrete, each serving a particular function and often existing as structurally separate from one another. Religion offers a prime example, and proponents of secularisation have often traced the decline in the social significance of religion with reference to the early modern church – which served an educational, welfare and health, as well as liturgical, function – contrasted with the contemporary church, which concerns itself primarily with

matters of private faith. With significant consensus that the spheres of family, work and religion are mainly kept discrete among the citizens of contemporary Britain, it is interesting to note how, within the clerical household, the boundaries between these three spheres of life are frequently blurred so that each field of life experience invades into another. This is most evident in recollections by clergy children of the clerical home: a domestic space that was frequently compromised by its use by non-family-members, be they parishioners, other clergy or church officials, as if it were a public space. The vicarage was at the same time a home, their father's workspace, and a context for the pastoral care and spiritual guidance of the needy. This is presented as an ambiguous predicament, and while some recalled fondly encounters with interesting and influential individuals, others focused on their feelings of displacement and alienation. Indeed, we may expect this blurring of boundaries to have been experienced as problematic, especially during formative years, when clergy children begin to learn that this arrangement is abnormal and counter to the dominant – more differentiated – cultural norm. As has been noted in previous studies of youth, a recurring source of alienation is a sense of being different from the norm, apart from the crowd, and in light of this, one can appreciate the potential for this experience among clergy children on a number of levels.

Our analysis of interview data revealed that many clergy children adopted a particular strategy in making sense of their identities, focused on unravelling these boundaries and maintaining an arrangement that keeps them discrete. Spiritual capital is thereby negotiated in a way that harnesses its advantages, but within a life situation that maintains the home/religion/work boundaries these individuals have since learnt as socially normal. For example, some respondents had sought to separate their understanding of Christian faith from the institution of the Church of England. This allowed them to account for their negative experiences during childhood as consequences of a flawed church rather than lay them at the door of Christianity as a whole, something they were reluctant to do. In fact, the vast majority of our respondents affirmed Christianity as a positive social force, with almost all of the 75 per cent who claimed a religious identity also claiming to be Christian (whether that be Church of England, Roman Catholic, or without a particular denomination, for example). This strategy also allowed our respondents to separate pressures on the family from Christianity itself, by associating them with professional pressures brought to bear on their father by the church, thus freeing up Christianity as a positive spiritual resource for appropriation in adult life and within the upbringing of their own children.

A different example can be found among respondents who acknowledged the values they received because of their upbringing, and saw these as connected to their father's vocation as a clergyman. They also affirmed these values in their own lives, but made sense of their worth as moral, social or professional skills. They did their job as their father did his job as a vicar, even though they were a corporate manager, teacher or civil servant and even though, for some, they had no interest in the church and no sense of religious identity. Hence, what might be called 'Christian virtues' are reconceived as professional values, thus separating

religion from professional life, while maintaining the spiritual capital acquired from being raised a clergy child. A sense of working out virtues through channels that are not explicitly Christian, or indeed religious at all, may also be found in the fact that almost three-quarters of our respondents had worked in the caring/nurture professions – e.g. teaching, nursing or social work – at some point in their lives; over half still did, and many traced their career choices to the values associated with the clergy household of their youth. One respondent commented on how her own experience of being raised in a clerical household had inspired her and her siblings to embrace moral causes in adult life, even though none had a strong connection to the church or a strong sense of Christian identity. As she commented:

... a friend of mine ... once sort of said 'you know you and your sisters do seem in love with dedicating yourselves to good causes, don't you?' And you know we took it for granted I suppose, that you should have moral principles and that they should lead you into actually doing something. And I think ... all those Sunday services probably had their affect ... and we've all stuck with it, one way or the other.

What difference do clergy families make?

These instances illustrate strategies for the negotiation of spiritual capital within the lives of individuals living in contemporary Britain. In accordance with Verter's understanding, they present spiritual capital as a multifaceted phenomenon, something capable of being transformed into other forms, but in dialogue with the boundaries established by early life experience. To take this observation further, one could argue that religious institutions enjoy a kind of social influence beyond the professed beliefs and practices of their members, channelled through the families of their leaders. One interpretation of this might refer to the secularisation of religious ideas – the reinterpretation of religious values learnt in childhood into more secular forms. But the high levels of affirmed religiosity among this group suggest that transformation, rather than erosion, may be a more appropriate description of this trend. Whether these transformed identities are likely to translate stated convictions into social action that has an identifiable religious dimension is less clear, and perhaps a comparative and longitudinal biographical study of the lives of clergy children is required before such questions can be answered with any justified confidence. What is clear is that the relationship between family upbringing and the negotiation of values in adult life is not simple, and calls for an analysis of the transmission of religious values that demands a renewed complexity in our understandings of religious identity and the life-course. Moreover, part of this understanding will need to take greater account than has been taken thus far of how religious identities evolve through adult life, and how this process often involves an ongoing conversation between individual agents and their memories of childhood, through which enduring ideas are forged.